to murder your sweet memory

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to murder your sweet memory

by revolvermonkcelot

Summary

"That's not it either though, is it?" he says. The space between them is fraught with electricity, the crackling static of unspoken words and unfulfilled possibilities and the frantic thud of her own heartbeat. "You came here to see if there was anything left of me." His voice is little more than a low murmur. This close to him, caught in the snare of his closed fingers, she appreciates how dangerous he could be, if pushed, and how she still can't bring herself to be afraid of him. "Take a look, Doctor Bloom. I want to know what you see."

(in which Will's release from prison - and return to the field - prompts a chaotic spiral of emotion and perception: what's left when vengeance runs dry, and wishful thinking comes to the fore. Five bodies are found in industrial freezers, and Will Graham thinks it is an act of love...)

Notes

My eternal thanks to Hannibalsbattlebot & Coloredink for making this thing happen & spurring me to write my first ever Hannibal fic - you guys rock.

Thank you to mygoldteeth, whose art is stunning and whose support for my writing made me smile when I was uncertain - how fortunate I've been to be paired with such a great artist! Please, please go check out her piece for this fic here: http://mygoldteeth.tumblr.com/post/113715654269 it's stunning and you'll love it

And thank you for reading. I hope you enjoy this monster.

See the end of the work for more notes

"Five bodies," Jack says, as he leads Will down the stairs into the basement, cordoned off already with the blue-and-white police tape which seems to attract crowds of onlookers like flies to shit. It's early, though - barely six AM by Will's watch - and the crime scene itself is tucked neatly away down here, away from prying eyes. It might have stayed that way for many more years had it not been for the spontaneous self-destruction of a compressor which, according to the laboratory manager - an utterly shellshocked woman in her mid-fifties - has been chugging away quite happily for the last eight years.

The freezer room sits several floors below the main laboratory, directly beneath the I.T department, which, Jack says, has been temporarily (and hastily) relocated to another building. The corridor leading down is dank and narrow and lit by a bank of flickering striplights. It is not an especially inviting environment, and Will can understand why the laboratory staff come down here only to sporadically monitor the temperature alarms. A sharp, briny stink emanates from the open door, an undercurrent of damp concrete and rusted metal. The linoleum is still glossy with recently-mopped water.

"Smells like a boatyard," Will says.

"Feeling nostalgic?" Jack doesn't smile, but Jack rarely smiles, and Will is not troubled by this; a brief glimpse of Jack's eyes tells him exactly where they are with each other. Jack is contrite and wary in equal measures; in Will, he sees a man who has suffered for sins he did not commit, swore *blind* he did not commit even as those around him turned their backs and averted their collective gaze. But he is also a man so entrenched in his belief (delusion? Madness?) that he arranged to have Hannibal Lecter murdered. And Will knows Jack will be justifying this to himself in a hundred different ways - perhaps Brown misinterpreted, perhaps it wasn't what Will intended, and in any case it wasn't like Will *himself* tied the noose, his hands are technically clean - but deep inside there's a doubt festering like a tumour, a hollow space inside of him which he keeps locked and guarded. The part of him which knows what Will Graham is capable of, if pushed hard enough.

Jack doesn't know that Will knows all of this. Better to keep it that way.

"It was a simpler life," Will says, offhanded.

"You'd have been bored rigid," Jack says. They come to the freezer room door, propped open by a half-filled mop bucket. Plain wooden door, no scuff marks or splintering. Single lock. Apparently security isn't a major concern down here. Perhaps it ought to have been. "No signs of forced entry," Jack says, echoing Will's train of thought.

"You wouldn't have to try too hard to pick a lock like that." Inside, the room is stark in a terrible, funereal kind of way; large, tomblike chest freezers arranged in rows like a mouthful of yellowing teeth, each with its own blinking red LED panel indicating internal temperature. Above them, a network of air vents sits flush against the ceiling, running a tight circuit like some kind of venous system. A man could crouch in there, Will thinks, peering momentarily up. A man could find all kinds of places to hide in here.

The air conditioning unit whirs noisily in the background.

"The five at the back," Jack prompts, indicating a row of freezers pushed up against the far wall. There's a tiny window a few inches from the ceiling, barely big enough for a cat to squeeze through, let alone sufficient natural light. The striplights lend the room an overbrightness, the kind of white, glaring glow one might expect to see in an operating theatre. Or, thinks Will, a little wryly, in the midst of an alien abduction. At his approach, Zeller takes a step back. He doesn't speak, barely even looks up. They're on interesting ground, he and Zeller; he senses a peculiar guilt in the set of Zeller's shoulders, a nervousness in his flickering gaze. Somewhere inside him, he's wondering whether, if he'd only just listened to Beverly for five fucking seconds...

Destructive thinking. Will avoids playing What If, at least where his own life is concerned. Because sometimes it feels as if there are infinite choices, infinite possibilities, but sometimes it seems that 'choice' is cruel and illusory, and that all paths inevitably lead to the same unseen singularity, the same dark room at the end of the corridor.

He already knows what waits for him in there.

The air conditioner in the centre of the room pumps out a continuous, pulsing wave of air, cold enough that the small hairs on the back of Will's neck prickle. The lids of these five freezers are ajar. A marine odour emanates, the smell of a harbour on a cold afternoon, redolent of saltwater and algae and chilled skin. He breathes deep as he cracks a lid open.

It's beautiful, although it shouldn't be. Solid ice, surface glistening with a thin layer of meltwater and inside, a pale blue gem; the naked corpse of a human being, tucked into a crouch. Spine a perfect curve, arching upwards and over, face pressed against the freezer floor. Each individual vertebra strains against the skin, each rib defined in shadow. The victim is male, Will intuits, though seen through the looking-glass it is oddly sexless, an angel depicted in resin. He's certain that the four others are male too. That much has revealed itself to him.

Will walks a slow circuit, glancing into the freezers. It's a ritual, he thinks; each body is formed of that same foetal crouch, spine rising toward the eye, curving away once more. There is a uniformity to these murders which suggests great care. The final freezer is almost entirely drained of water - courtesy of the dead compressor, Will presumes, and what strange fortune that turned out to be. Inside, diminished in his exposure, the fifth victim lies tucked into his prayer-position. Stirred by the breeze, shallow water gently laps at the crooks of his knees, the delicate whorls of his ears.

You could have stayed here forever, Will thinks, staring down at his frostburnt flesh. *If only we'd left you alone.*

He turns around, signalling vaguely for Jack and company to leave.

The door shuts with a gentle thump.

Will Graham closes his eyes.

The pendulum swings.

*

"It's an act of love."

The forensics lab now, and Will tries not to think too hard about what's missing. The space beside Price and Zeller which Crawford refuses to fill (Will can't bring himself to deride Jack's sentimentality, and Beverley's absence is a void now, a wound nobody knows how to heal.)

Jack raises a practiced eyebrow. "Strange way of showing it," he says. "These men were drowned, and their corpses frozen. Where does love enter into it?"

"Actually, they weren't drowned." Price has lost none of his matter-of-fact enthusiasm and Will finds himself curiously reassured. If he closes his eyes, he can almost imagine nothing ever changed. "No water in the lungs. They were dead before submersion."

"Then how did they die?" Jack asks.

"We're working on it," Zeller says. "No major wounds, and no signs of a struggle, though. We're working on the theory that maybe they were drugged somehow. We're running a tox screen on the freshest stiff, see what we can find."

"Then why the water?" Jack says, turning expectantly to Will.

"Preservation," Will says. He's perched on the bench adjacent, hands clasped in his lap. The last victim is spread out on the bench before him, with Zeller at the head and Price at the feet and Jack presiding in the middle, frame formidable, a deep frown etched into the slab of his face. "They were in the process of...of *changing* somehow. She saw that in them, and she didn't want it..."

"She?" Jack's frown deepens, the lines of his brow forming great, dark fissures. He can almost see the statistics flashing red in Jack's brain - *the vast majority of serial killers are male: where's your proof?*

"Yes," Will replies, a little irritable at having been interrupted. Jack usually knows better. "*She* perceived them as perfect, but some transformation was about to take place. And she couldn't let it happen. She's seen it already, seen how it destroys. It's a...a *virulent* process. She can't cure it, or stop it, so she stops *them*. Preserves them. It's an act of contrition, of apology...." Hands pinwheeling as his stream of consciousness unfurls, half-mumbled yet somehow compelling. "She's failed before. Someone she cared about, maybe. A son, a kid brother...they're all of an age, that *means* something. It's symbolic. She couldn't stop that first implosion, and she blames herself for it. This is her making amends."

"You think this is about a dead relative?" Jack presses.

"It's not the death that's important," Will says. He grips the edge of the bench between his fingers. The metal is uncomfortably cold against his skin. "It's what she's trying to stop. The

process. Necrosis, physical or metaphorical. It's a ruination. Maybe death is the end stage but that's not what matters to her."

Jack nods. "We're gonna need detailed autopsies of all five bodies," he says, addressing Price and Zeller. "I want them checked for degenerative disease processes. Cancer, Lou Gehrig's, MS, Huntingdon's...anything which causes a slow decline. Once we have ID's for the victims I want all five of them checked for history of mental illness..."

Jack keeps on talking, giving orders in that brusque, no-nonsense fashion and it's incredible, Will thinks, to acknowledge that only a few days before he'd spend the best part of twelve hours staring at a formation of cracks on the ceiling of his cell. Amazing how normal things feel all of a sudden; almost like he's supposed to be here. And there's a curious peace inside him despite the circumstances; when he closes his eyes he sees the water cascading into the belly of the freezer, the bright glimmer of droplets beading dead skin. His lips curl into a smile. *She saved you* he thinks, as serenity flows through him like icewater through his veins. *She saved you from a lifetime of pain and sorrow. Preserved forever in the hearts of those who loved you.* He can still feel, like a ghostly residue, the swell of pure, fierce love in his heart that he'd felt when he'd slipped into the killer's mind. When he'd looked deep into the ice and beheld her design. She gave them a gift. She made it so they could never succumb to whatever darkness lay inside of them.

When he opens his eyes again, there's Alana on the other side of the glass. Their eyes meet for a moment. She's dressed in red, her hair loosely braided, cheeks lightly flushed, as if she's just come in from the cold. She looks beautiful, but her eyes are cold, examining him a distant, measured way. Like he's a patient. A curiosity. His smile dies long before it reaches his lips, and then she's moving on, and it hurts him in some small, ridiculous way that she doesn't even look back once.

*

"...and he shouldn't *be* here, Jack. This is unauthorised and worse, it's harmful. To him. Potentially to Hannibal, but to himself most of all."

Jack is an immovable object against the force of her protest, sat at his desk, fingers steepled. He's listened to her lecture with incredible patience, and now she's spent her anger in one tempestuous burst she feels diminished somehow. The look in Jack's eyes is unabashedly dismissive, and this is a look she knows well. This is the look Jack adopts when he knows he's been called out on some bullshit or other, but wants to maintain the illusion that he's completely in control. Might as well try to drink the ocean with a spoon than argue with him in this state, but here she is all the same. Because she doesn't know when to quit. Because she's frightened for Will, and for Hannibal, and it's all mixed up in her mind because one ought to matter more than the other but that isn't so.

"I asked him if he felt up to this assignment and he assured me that he feels more stable now than he has in a long time." Jack is talking in that patient, measured tone he uses whenever his position is precarious. They both know it's a terrible idea to rely on Will's opinion of his own mental state, but Jack will conveniently ignore the fact if it means getting results. And Will gets results like nobody else. "It's a temporary thing, Alana. I know it's too soon to take him back on permanently..."

"I don't think that's a..."

"However," Jack interrupts. "That's not to say I don't understand your concerns. I want to limit Will's involvement in this case as much as I can. I've asked Hannibal to consult on the rest of the investigation. If I need Will, I'll ask for him. But only if I need him." He stares at her. His eyes are dark and grave. They've seen things she's only ever read about in case reports. She doesn't envy him his position - the horrors he has to witness, the difficult choices he has to make. And she feels a little contrite, then, looking down at her immaculately polished shoes, at the hands clasped in her lap which have never had to hold a gun. "I care about his wellbeing too. But I've got lives to save, and I have to care about those too."

"Why not use Hannibal from the start?"

"Because I had a hunch that we were dealing with something unorthodox, and unorthodox is what Will does. I needed that suspicion confirmed. Now I have that confirmation, he can go back to his fishing or whatever it is he's doing these days." Jack, for his part, refuses to look at all contrite. The set of his shoulders and the upward tilt of his chin telegraph confidence, assuredness, because he *has* to be sure. "You know he's decided to resume his therapy with Dr. Lecter?"

"I'm aware of that," she says, a little icily. She doesn't ask him how he knows. It must have been Will's bargaining chip, waving the fact at Jack as if it proves he's working real hard on getting better. On building bridges across the chasm of his ruined friendship with Hannibal. Except that Jack is surely sharper than that, aware of Will's potential to inveigle and manipulate, and that makes her suspect that Jack is playing his cards far closer to his chest than she had originally assumed.

When she passes by the forensics lab Will is no longer there. Zeller, Price and a team of scrub-clad gophers scurry back and forth, doing whatever it is they do with their cadavers. He must have gone, she thinks. He's served his purpose, performed his mental party trick and given Jack the insight he asked for. Anger boils in her gut. Her heels click against the floor as she walks, stiff-legged with indignation. Is she the only one who desperately misses the man Will was? Does everyone else see him only as a tool, a creature of function? The day Will loses his mind entirely, they'll all just shake their heads and mumble about what a terrible shame it is, and not one of them will blame themselves. They'll feel it deep down, in some shadowed part of themselves; they'll stare into Will's wide, terrified eyes and see themselves reflected in the blue of his irises and they will know what they did to him.

But nobody will feel it as deeply, as terribly as Alana will.

Except, perhaps, for Hannibal.

*

On the drive up Alana's mind runs elaborate simulations of how this scenario might pan out. She'll ask him what the hell he's thinking, what the hell he's *trying* to do, getting involved in all of this madness again; she'll ask him plainly. She won't try to shield him from her anger (though she might swallow down her desolation; he doesn't need to know how profoundly wounded she is by it all. It won't change anything. She’s already had her funeral for Will,

tasted her own sadness on Hannibal's tongue and experienced the raw sensuality of grief, echoed and amplified in the slow, exquisite ministrations of one who shares it. No amount of sadness cannot un-consecrate the grave she and Hannibal have made for him.

Anger is better. Anger stabilises. Brings clarity.)

Some of these hypothetical scenarios end in a maelstrom of raised voices and bitter epithets. Some end in desperate apologies for the wrongs he's visited upon Hannibal, and she'll turn on her heel and walk away, cold and unrelenting, because Hannibal's torn wrists and bruised throat (a memory now, but the horror of it lingers still) demand more than apologetic platitudes. She's so prepared for the rage she'll feel at the sight of him that when he shows up, puzzled but clearly pleased to see her in that absent, almost canine way of his, she's almost disappointed to feel her anger dissipate. Mostly; there's a cold, hard little core of it resting deep in the very centre of her, and when Will's expression shifts, eyes narrowing in suspicion, she's comforted by its presence.

(His dogs keep their distance, perhaps sensing discord. She may have played stepmother, and played it well, but it's Will they love. Animals are supposed to be intuitive, to sense darkness in people. Apparently, these ones are defective.

Unless she's wrong about him.

She wants to be wrong about him.)

There's a long, drawn-out pause in which they regard one another silently, neither daring to shatter this moment for fear of what awaits them on the other side. And she thinks, this is where it ends. This is where he makes some pithy little remark about the nature of my visit, and I'll pull the trigger on it all. It'll be over. Everything we've had will be over. And for the longest moment it really does look as if it's going to go this way; she can hear the cogs in his brain turning, almost *feel* the words forming on his tongue, his posture tight and defensive and almost afraid, and Will is never more given to rudeness than when he's rattled. She draws air into her lungs, pulls herself upright, waits for him to fire the first shot.

Instead, he says "You look cold."

And she doesn't know what to say to that except "I am."

*

She's not supposed to be here.

She's supposed to have severed their friendship months ago, but her resolve on the matter is proving strangely elusive. And this is how she finds herself in Will Graham's house, sitting in Will Graham's armchair with a glass of something which looks like scotch and smells like diesel fumes (but tastes, perversely, like woodsmoke and clear mountain streams and, faintly, of honey. It's like liquid fire going down, settling in her gut like embers. Surprisingly good.)

He doesn't sit, choosing instead to perch on the arm of the sofa, long legs inclined before him. He's silent as she drinks, watching her with an offhandedness that's obviously feigned, and she's conscious of the way her lips meet the curve of the glass, the way her throat bobs as she swallows. She needn't worry; despite prison, despite attempted murder, despite *everything* he's still such a goddamn gentleman that he keeps his gaze carefully averted the entire time, lest she think he's trying to subvert her polite but emphatic rejection.

As if to bridge the chasm between them, Winston sets himself down at Alana's feet with a sigh. She reaches out a hand to scratch his head and he relaxes into her palm, inclining his face towards her.

"I think they miss you," Will says.

"Let's not pretend this is a social visit," Alana says. Her voice is a little rough from the (whisky? Bourbon? Moonshine?) alcohol. It makes her sound as if she's been crying. "You know why I came here."

"Do I?" He raises an eyebrow, mock-quizzical. He's not angry. He doesn't even seem hurt, not especially; there's a blankness to him, like he's not sure how he's supposed to feel about the questions coiled on her tongue. She *wants* him to be angry, she realises, as he sips from his own glass (she stares unapologetically at his mouth as he drinks, at the utterly unselfconscious way his tongue slides across his lips, lapping up stray droplets. There is nothing tidy about Will.) She wants him to take Hannibal's name in vain, to accuse him and damn him and blame him. She wants him to set it all on fire so she can stand back and watch it burn.

She wants to tell him she's fucking Hannibal just to see the look on his face.

Worst of all, she'd been ready to burn it all to the ground herself, the first time she'd come here after Will's release. Psyched herself up on the drive home, convincing herself that he'd gone too far, and that she couldn't possibly follow, not any more, not into the darkness he's so intent on embracing. But here he is, calm and quiet, and here *she* is, souring a palate grown used to Chianti and Cabernet Sauvignon, and there's a horrible sense of normality beneath the surface of it all. A sense of missed opportunity. Here's what you could have had, she tells herself, glancing momentarily at the warm chaos of Will's living-room, at the sleeping dogs curled up in a pile by the unlit fire; here's the cosy domesticity you threw away. You might have stopped it. You might have saved him.

"You're back on cases," she says. "What the hell are you thinking?"

He laughs. The bastard *laughs*, a small, bitter sound, and there's the anger, cresting inside of her like a great wave. It's almost a relief to sense it there again, familiar as an old friend. She puts down the glass with trembling hands, looks him straight in the eye. "You're not even going to dignify me with an explanation?"

"You didn't come here so I could dignify you with an explanation," Will says, a little wearily. "You came to tell me that this is unhealthy for me. And it's not because you're worried about me, but because you're worried about *him*. You're afraid that I'm going to snap, aren't you? I can almost *read* what you're thinking. I'll get too close. Go crazy again. And there's Doctor

Lecter, stuck in the middle with me. You're afraid it'll play out just like before, only this time I'll pull my gun on him right in the middle of his office and paint the bookcases with his grey matter. Am I close?"

"Perhaps I wouldn't be thinking it if you hadn't tried to kill him in the first damn place." It was a mistake to come here. She can see that now. She rises sharply from her chair, startling Winston. "I don't know what I was expecting," she says, fussing with the buttons on her coat. She can't seem to get them right. She's flushed, and she doesn't know if it's the alcohol or the desperate need to get the hell out, right now, before she hurls his stupid glass across the room and revels in the satisfaction of this small destruction. "This delusion is dangerous, Will, I wish you'd entertain the idea for one fucking second that maybe you're wrong about him..."

He catches her arm as she shoves past him. Firm, but surprisingly gentle, and she kids herself that she can't escape his grasp but his fingers are loose, allowing her egress if she wants it. "That's not it either though, is it?" he says. The space between them is fraught with electricity, the crackling static of unspoken words and unfulfilled possibilities and the frantic thud of her own heartbeat. "You came here to see if there was anything left of me." His voice is little more than a low murmur. This close to him, caught in the snare of his closed fingers, she appreciates how dangerous he could be, if pushed, and how she still can't bring herself to be afraid of him. "Take a look, Doctor Bloom. I want to know what you see."

She breathes deep, inhaling the scent of him - soap and whisky, dog fur and pine needles and, very faint, the Old Spice she knows Jack buys him every Christmas, because what the hell do you buy a man like Will Graham? ("A comb," Beverley had once suggested, and that stings too, because Beverley had been certain of him before Alana ever was. And look where that got her. Does he blame Hannibal for that too?) She breathes him in, savours the sweet familiarity of him, wonders if he might taste the way she remembers too.

And then she meets his gaze.

He hides nothing from her. He never has. If there's one small solace in this clusterfuck of a situation, it's that Will has never been able to hide the truth from her (though it occurs to Alana that sometimes the lie might have been sweeter, if only for a while.) So when she studies him - close enough to see the pink bloom of capillaries in the whites of his eyes, the delicate tracery of crow's feet fanning outwards - she sees everything. Bitterness at his incarceration, at those who disbelieved him (he won't hold a grudge; he knows physical evidence is god to forensics.) The hazy-eyed confusion of his illness has long since passed; there's clarity now, a hard-edged certainty in all the notions he holds, and there's the root of his delusion, his lack of remorse. His pupils are dilated, signposting his appreciation for her warmth and proximity.

Mostly, though, she sees *him*. The ever-present third party inside Will's head, the narrator of his nightmares and centrepiece around which Will has begun the slow, fragile business of rebuilding himself. Will may think he knows himself now, but Alana senses a lingering confusion. A delineation of the boundaries between himself and the object of his obsession.

Will thinks Hannibal is destroying him. Stripping him to the bone and laying new flesh in its place. But it's never been clearer to Alana that the Hannibal inside Will's head bears scant resemblance to the one she *knows* is real. The Hannibal who sits beside her at the piano and

guides her fingers, playing sweet, halting melodies, who smiles gently when she hits the wrong note. The one who unconsciously rubs at the scars on his wrists when he talks about Will; his heart is full of him, in spite of the great wrong Will has visited upon him.

The only person destroying Will is himself, a Hannibal built in his own image.

"What do you see?" he asks her, and there's a desperation in his voice, a slight tremble in the depths of his throat. His fingers tighten around her arm, an almost imperceptible pressure. He still wants her to believe him. Somewhere, in the labyrinthine mess of Will's strange and beautiful mind there's a space she never ceased to occupy, a space his obsession with Hannibal Lecter - and the things he maintains the man did to him - has not yet turned to rubble. But something inside of him is broken, and she doesn't know how to put it right.

I can't fix you, she thinks, as she reaches both hands to his face and pulls him down, crushing his mouth against her own; he lets out a hiss through his teeth as she anchors a hand in the messy curls at his nape and tugs hard. I can't fix you, but I can destroy you. I can tear you to pieces and put you back together again, and you'll never be the same but maybe it'll be better this time. Maybe this way I can still have you. His mouth is warm, the sharp tang of whisky delicious; she pulls sharply away, fingers still knotted in his hair, and he regards her with unabashed desire and no small amount of confusion. His lips part, the question stuck in his throat - *what exactly is happening here?* - but she silences him with her mouth, her tongue, her hips hard against his as she pushes him against the wall. His total acquiescence is beautiful. He lets her unbutton his shirt, reciprocating with an unexpected hesitance, as if she might change her mind at any time and rebuke him for ever thinking she might want this.

And she *does* want this, even though every logical cell in her brain is yelling at her to stop, because this way madness lies. She wants this as much as she wants Hannibal, except that she knows this is bad for her. With Hannibal is the potential for a future, a life, something to settle comfortably into. She wants him and needs him in equal measures, and, she senses, the same is true for him. She *hopes.*

This, though. This is chaos. This is everything she's ever felt since they first locked Will away pouring from her like a newly-breached dam. And she could stop it, if she wanted to. She has that opportunity. But she's just so damn *tired* of everything, and Will is warm and pliant and right here.

Of all her hypothetical outcomes to all her hypothetical scenarios, fucking Will Graham had never once crossed her mind.

She unbuckles his belt in one swift motion, slides her hand down and puts any idea of ambiguity to rest. He sighs against her lips, slips one palm against the small of her back and pulls her around so she's the one pressed against the wall, trapped in the cage of his arms even as she wriggles out of her dress. And now she truly can't escape him but it's good, it's *perfect*, the heat of his skin and the taste of his mouth and the slow, tentative motion of his hands, like it's been a long time since he touched a woman this way. Like he's forgotten how.

Tangled in one another, they somehow stumble their way up the stairs. By the time they make it to his dark, silent bedroom there are few clothes left to shed; his shirt hangs loose and unbuttoned from his shoulders. Even now, he still bears the scars of his illness and

imprisonment: the sharp jut of his hipbones painfully apparent, the shallow concavity of his abdomen where she had always imagined lean muscle and, perhaps, a little puppy-fat. He reclines beneath her and she runs her hands gently down his sides, thighs splayed either side of his waist. His ribs are a delicate concertina of bone and sinew, his skin pale blue in the dark.

He's watching her all the while, and there's a spark of his old self in the way he looks at her - wide-eyed, almost nervous, his hands skimming her contours as if he can't quite believe this is happening. It hurts to be reminded. To remember what she's lost, who he was before everything; sweet, unspoiled, endearingly awkward in his affection for her. And she hates him a little for it, because it's not who he is anymore. It's an echo. A memory. She hates him for making her think he might still feel that way about her, and that things could ever be normal between them.

She can't have with Will what she might have with Hannibal. Not then, and certainly not now.

Suddenly she's fully, horribly aware of what an idiot she's being. She wriggles free of his grasp, shuffling backwards off the bed. The floor is cold against her bare soles. Removed from his warmth, she's suddenly conscious of how little she's wearing, and of how cold it is in this room, with the black sky stark and starry at the windows. She scrabbles for her clothes, replacing them hurriedly as Will props himself up on his elbows, regarding her with careful neutrality.

"I'm confused," he begins, tilting his head a little to the side. "Do you..."

"Don't," she says, a little too sharply. And then, softer: "Don't, please. This was a bad idea. I thought I could try to...I thought, but I can't, and..." she shakes her head. She's upset, and she's fighting it, but he can see it. He sees everything. That's what makes him so fucking infuriating. Somehow, he intuits that the last thing she wants right now is his reassurance and, perhaps a little conscious of this new rejection, pulls the rumpled bedsheets up over his shoulders. He says nothing, which is precisely what she wants from him in this moment.

When did Will Graham obtain such an intimate map of her head?

"I'll let myself out," she says.

He nods. And then, just as she steps out onto the landing, she hears him, quietly, almost an afterthought: "I'm sorry."

*

When she's gone, Will pads downstairs, cold and barefoot, and it's only the lingering scent of her perfume and the ghost of her mouth on his which convinces him it wasn't all just an odd, feverish dream.

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Alana thinks a lot about what Will said on the drive home. And even with all she thinks she knows about Will Graham, she cannot figure out what exactly he was apologising for.

*

In the end, she doesn't go home.

It's full dark, but she knows Hannibal does not usually retire early. She can't say why she steps out of the car (parked a few blocks away, because a short walk in the cold air might afford her a clarity she badly needs) and walks, head held low against the wind, gait tight and rapid as the chill seeps into her bones.

He smiles when he answers the door to her, although there's something faintly quizzical in the set of his brow. "Doctor Bloom," he says, because to be proper in greeting a person is one of Hannibal's many endearing idiosyncracies. "Please." He steps into the hallway, allowing her entry, and relief floods through her like warm blood, filling the empty spaces inside of her. He's dressed in a crisp white shirt and check waistcoat, sleeves creased as if recently rolled to the elbow. It suggests he's recently prepared dinner, and, more importantly, that she hasn't interrupted him in the process of turning in for the night.

She enters the dining room. The patio door looks out onto a perfectly black vista. But for the lack of stars, it could be Will's bedroom window. She shakes the thought from her mind and smiles as Hannibal takes her coat, hanging it carefully on the stand adjacent to the door.

"You look cold," he says.

Her heart lurches. "I am," she replies. When he turns to face her she's still staring at him, bemused and unblinking. She glances quickly away, pretending to be absorbed in the fruit platter gracing the centre of the dining table. Jewel-bright slices of starfruit and guava, glistening white lychees and pomegranate seeds like tiny rubies, arranged as artistically as any meal Hannibal has ever presented her.

"I'm afraid I prepared only enough dinner for one," Hannibal says, following her gaze. "I wasn't anticipating guests. Of course, you would be welcome to join me for dessert. In fact..." he pulls out a chair, shoots her a thoroughly disarming smile. Under any other circumstances, she might be charmed. "I insist."

"Thank you. I uh. I'm afraid I'm not very hungry." This, at least, is the truth; Will's whisky sits uneasy, the woodsmoke-and-honey aftertaste lingering in her mouth (the taste of *him*, too, and that only serves to tighten the knot in her guts.) What, she asks herself, as she slips into the chair offered, is she so nervous about? Whatever she and Hannibal have is thinly-sketched, the mere outline of a potential relationship, and what happened with Will...well, one could consider it a blip, the spark of a bad idea extinguished before it ever had the chance to catch.

No, she thinks, watching Hannibal as he brings over a carafe of wine and two elegant, long-stemmed glasses. It's not a matter of fidelity, if indeed those rules even apply at this stage. It's a different kind of guilt souring in her stomach. A faithlessness which owes little to sex and lust and everything to promises made in earnest, and broken too soon afterwards.

They buried Will together, but she alone has dug him back up.

"A drink, then," Hannibal says. The wine slips like red silk into her glass. Cru Beaujolais, judging by the heady apricot scent. "You seem troubled, Alana. I would never complain at the chance to share your company, but it's quite unusual for you to come unannounced at such a late hour. Is everything all right?"

"Is it late?" She looks over at the clock on the mantle. Ten PM. "Oh. Oh, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to impose. I had no idea. I can...I can go..." She makes to stand but Hannibal merely smiles, a gentle, reassuring upward curve of the lips.

"I wouldn't dream of sending you back out into the cold," Hannibal says, slipping into his own seat. He fills his glass, but does not drink. Not yet. "And you are certainly not imposing. Frankly, it can be somewhat lonely, dining by myself. I find dinner a far more pleasurable pursuit when I have friends to share it with." He picks up a small silver fork from his place-setting and gently skewers a lychee, raising the fruit slowly to his lips. The pale, translucent flesh gleams almost pinkly in the light like the skin of a cave-fish. He chews thoughtfully, savouring the delicate sweetness. She watches the motion of his jaw, imagines the give of the flesh between his teeth. She can almost feel the juice flooding across her tongue, smooth and sweet as blood.

"I went to see Will," she says.

He lowers the fork, replacing it precisely where he found it. "Business or pleasure? Or dare I ask?" he says, although there's a lightness to his tone which suggests an absence of upset. Hannibal does not seem to be especially well-acquainted with anger; he exudes an almost angelic calmness, as if anger is an emotion he has long conquered.

"Neither," she says. She holds the wineglass at the stem, gazing momentarily down at her own distorted reflection in the liquid; a red so rich it's almost black as ink. She's not sure why she's telling the truth when a simple lie might have sufficed, but she has never felt comfortable lying to Hannibal. Like Will, he sees everything. Unlike Will, he possesses enough grace and tact to pretend he's seen nothing at all. "I wanted to know...did Jack discuss bringing Will back into the field? With you, I mean. Do you honestly believe it's a good idea?"

"What's your opinion?"

"You already know my opinion," she says, with a sigh.

Hannibal shrugs. "He has a gift," he says. "And he feels duty-bound to use it. It gives him a sense of purpose. With the right safeguards, I think this could be good for him." He smiles, a gentle quirk of the lips. "I'm his therapist, Alana, but I'm also his friend. I will not let him slip down the rabbit hole a second time."

"What you're trying to do for him is admirable. Noble, even. But I don't know if you can make that sort of promise. It's not a question of your ability, but he has this fixation...these *ideas*...he needs help, Hannibal, but I don't think you can give it to him. I don't think you should try." She takes a long sip of the wine. It's full-bodied and delicious and so rich it makes her throat ache. "I worry there's a chance he'll try and hurt you again."

"That was an unfortunate incident," Hannibal says, plucking a pomegranate seed up between his thumb and forefinger. Carefully, he transfers it to the other hand. In the shallow cup of his palm, it's a droplet of blood suspended perfectly in time. "But an isolated one. He harboured a misplaced resentment towards me." He swirls the wine gently, raises it to his nose. She's seen this ritual a hundred times now and she never stops being fascinated by it; the flutter of his eyelids slipping shut, the slight parting of the lips, as if in sensual pleasure. She sips her own wine, feeling graceless and improper. "I believe we've fostered an understanding."

"You're denying the possibility?"

"I am denying nothing." Hannibal sips delicately, pausing to savour the wine. "He assured me he would not attempt to kill me a second time," he says, gazing with silent appreciation into the glass. "Whatever else Will may or may not be, I believe he is a man of his word. And on this occasion, I have no reason not to trust him. Do you trust him, Alana?"

Her eyes narrow. "Are you psychoanalysing me?"

If he's offended by her assertion, he doesn't show it. "I assure you, my motives are entirely transparent. Do you?"

She considers her answer. Her head is a cluttered space, a muddle of thoughts and shadows and the aborted beginnings of questions she has never quite been able to put into words. The accumulated chemical influence of wine and whisky and her own unspent arousal makes it hard to reconcile her feelings about Will; her thoughts are punctuated by the heat of Will's mouth, his skin, the feel of his narrow ribcage between her thighs. She lowers her gaze, staring into her own glass; can she pass off the flush creeping up her neck as Beaujolais alone?

"I'm not sure Will even trusts himself," she replies.

Hannibal smiles. He knows she's being deliberately evasive, but he makes allowances for her. Lets her challenge and question, perhaps even appreciates the perpetual motion of the gears inside her brain, because he understands that their kind cannot help but enquire; to ask how and why is codified into their very being. "I do appreciate your concern," he says, by way of closing the subject, and she doesn't mind; she doesn't want to think too deeply about Will Graham anymore. He is uniquely confusing and frustrating and when she tries to reach deep inside herself to find that safe, reassuring thread of anger, she's alarmed to discover a hundred other threads tangled up in there, a great bolus of thoughts and feelings and desires she can't begin to sift through.

Her thoughts about Hannibal are simpler to comprehend. Safer. It's why he's always been the better choice; she does not find herself asking 'what if'.

"I want you to be safe," she says, and to her own ears she sounds very young. "And I want him to get better. I'm afraid that exposing his old vulnerabilities will render both those outcomes impossible."

He stands. Places outstretched palms on her shoulders and gently coaxes her so she's looking up at him, staring into those serene eyes, dark in the cool lamplight.

"Do you trust me?" he asks.

"Yes," she says, without hesitation, because she has had to be certain about it; in all those desperate conversations with Will (prison jumpsuit baggy around his thin shoulders, the smell of bleach and detergent and his fear, sharp as a cornered animal's) she denied him his vindication time after time, refusing to indulge his delusion even as she sought desperately to free him from the locked cell of his own madness. Because she *knows* Hannibal. She's trained with him, learned from him, discussed and debated and hypothesised; she's dined with him, cooked with him, danced with him; she's stumbled home drunk once or twice, propped against him for support as he guided her into a taxi, paying the fare (and, she knows, tipping generously) to ensure her safe and swift return home.

She's been in his bed, pinioned beneath him, naked and exposed and entirely at his mercy, and if Hannibal were anything close to the monster Will believes him to be she would surely not feel so safe beside him in the dark.

"Then trust me," Hannibal says.

*

When at last their evening completes its inevitable trajectory towards his bedroom (he undressing her with deft fingers, drinking her in with his eyes, and if he notices her bra is improperly fastened he isn't troubled by it) she forcibly banishes Will to the corner of her mind where all her ghosts reside and focuses instead on Hannibal's clever hands, the lean-muscled litheness of him, poise so utterly unmanufactured; he seduces her with delicious confidence, a sureness which suggests he has memorised all the lessons her body has taught him. She's never had a lover so quietly assertive; he does not dominate, is not arrogant, but he seems to know exactly how to touch her, focusing so entirely on her pleasure that she almost forgets the act is composed of two people. He plays her body like an instrument, fine-tuned to respond perfectly to the caress of his fingers, and she is caught inextricably in the rhythm of it all, following his lead eagerly, breathlessly. And everything is perfect until he buries his face in the crook of her shoulder, lips grazing her skin; there's a momentary pause, and her heart stutters in her chest because she knows that he knows. That he can smell Will on her (pine needles and whiskey and Old Spice) as surely as he can name her perfume from a distance.

She pulls sharply away, disentangling herself with startling lack of propriety. "Hannibal," she begins, still breathless, "it wasn't...nothing happened. Not the way you're thinking." Even as the words pour out there's a part of her which remains defiant, upright: *I have nothing to be ashamed of, if you can have a private relationship with Will then with what arrogance do you deny me the same?*

But he just reaches out a hand, traces the curve of her jaw with his thumb and whispers "Sssh." And then she's caught up in him again, swept into the undertow of her own confused lust, and when he kisses her there's a fervour she's never felt before, an eager aggression, and she knows he's searching for Will, seeking to isolate the taste of him. He presses his mouth hard into the curve of her clavicle and inhales, a deep, shuddering breath. His eyes are heavy-lidded with a greedy desire, and there's an inelegance to their rhythm now, almost a desperation, their choreography dissonant as they taste and touch and fuck. And she knows

this is deeply fucked up but oh god, somehow it's so good, the euphoria of this intimate secret and the strange power it gifts her. She closers her eyes and tightens her legs around him, the muscles of his flanks drawn taut as cords, drawing him deeper, and when she comes at last, face pressed into his hair, it occurs to her that she's not entirely sure who she's fucking anymore.

*

Afterwards, they recline in a bed which is surely much too large for Hannibal alone and in the grey darkness, she dozes fitfully. Beside her, Hannibal seems to have fallen into a deep, peaceful sleep. One arm is slung almost casually around her waist, drawing her close in a gesture of easy possession. And it feels natural to lay with him like this, basking in that warm, postcoital fuddle somewhere on the precipice of sleep.

She can still taste the salt of his skin on her lips, and that feels natural too.

But something is different. And as she lays there, listening to the low rumble of his breathing (Hannibal snores sometimes, albeit gently; the dissonance of this amuses her) she tries, in that muzzy-headed and indistinct way, to piece together what just happened. She's never really thought of what happens in this bed as 'fucking', but she can describe it no other way; it was unrefined and animal and intense and she's not sure if she feels dirty and ashamed or a little euphoric. Both, perhaps. Because Will Graham has always been a ghost between them, but she's never felt his presence as acutely as she did tonight.

(She's thought about Will once or twice, briefly, in the midst of it all; always unbidden, and always shut down before thought became fantasy. It felt wrong to bring him into this bed after all that has happened. It felt wrong to want him at all. And now he's here anyway, and she doesn't want to think too hard about how that happened. *She* didn't invite him this time, and she doesn't want to think about what that means.)

She shifts, turning onto her side to face Hannibal. He's perfectly still, lips slightly parted, angelic and serene in the grey pre-dawn light like a sculpture carved with great care and precision. Nothing about Hannibal seems accidental; he seems to have been designed with great care. He has the kind of face she finds herself staring helplessly at, fascinated by the strange and beautiful angles of him, the way he smiles at her like she's something sweet and rare and precious.

(He smiles at Will that way too sometimes, though she's never considered it might be more than a mentor's pride, or perhaps a quiet pleasure taken in healing the damaged.

There are connections begging to be made here, clamouring in the back of her mind for her attention, but she does not want to wade into that vast web. Not now.)

As she drifts off at last, nose pressed into the soft down of the pillow, she imagines she can smell whisky somewhere very far away.

*

It's pitch dark and he might be deep underground but it smells wrong; his nose is filled with the sour tang of old metal. When he swallows - throat cold and dry as a bone - he tastes blood.

He shifts in the dark. The walls are tight around him, a hollow womb possessed of a chill so acute he can feel it gnawing at his bones, lapping at the marrow. He should be afraid but all he feels is peace, a quiet acceptance. This is his crib and his marriage bed and his tomb, this black and airless space. This is his entire life, cleansed of every mistake he's ever made, every bitter thought he's ever had. No questions to ask of himself, no visions, no empathy. No secret, awful desires to swallow down and bury deep. No blood on his hands. In here, he is not a murderer. In here, he never will be.

This must be what it feels like to die.

He could stay here forever, he thinks, cheek pressed against the floor. If only they would let him. But he can hear feet on tiles like a heartbeat growing louder as they come to pull him rudely from his rest. He murmurs a protest nobody will hear, curling tightly, wrapping his arms around himself. Light pours in as the lid creaks open. When he looks up he sees Alana, poised above him, bright light forming a corona around her, and she smiles with sweet benevolence down at him. The water begins to rise all around him, colder than anything he's ever felt in his life. It's his absolution, he thinks, as it fills his nose, trickles down his throat. His naked spine is like braille running all the way up into the wet thicket of his hair, plastered now against his face. He is stripped of everything but bare skin and bone, wide-open eyes and empty lungs.

He has never seen such love in Alana's eyes as he has in that moment.

A pure, beautiful joy blooms in his chest and he supposes this must be where his heart is, somewhere in the pressure-heavy cavern of his ribcage. Never again will she look upon him those sad, desperate eyes, as if in redeeming the wrongs visited upon him he is also betraying her. Hannibal's face appears quite suddenly beside Alana's, distorted through the water (pressing down now on his paper-delicate skull, and his veins would surely burst, bright red clouds in the ice blue water, if there were any blood left in them at all.) He slips a hand into the water, sleeve rolled high, exposing the delta of blue veins beneath the skin, the familiar gnarl of scar tissue across his wrist. His fingers splay, beseeching, asking Will to answer. Asking him to come home.

Asking him not to throw away everything they've built.

Will's lips part as he smiles. His mouth fills with water.

And there are arms around him, suddenly; strong and familiar, sinews like thick cord as they pull Will up, out into the air. He feels weightless, insubstantial, like there's nothing inside him but fluid, emptied and embalmed and laid here to rest. Only he can't rest anymore. He can never rest because there will always be Hannibal, and as he's lifted, coughing and choking and colder than he's ever been in his life, water pouring from his open mouth in great gouts, he knows it's Hannibal who has denied him this perfect end. He takes a breath. It feels like the first he's ever taken. Blood thrums once again in his veins, loud in his ears, hot beneath the glacial chill of his skin. He is alive. He is alive, and he can feel himself rotting once more.

Hannibal lowers him to the floor with the greatest care. It's almost obscene, the way he looks down at him, those gentle, benevolent eyes, a terrible joy bright in his eyes. He smoothes a clot of wet hair from Will's forehead, caressing his face with his thumb. His hands are so warm they almost burn.

"There now," he murmurs. "You're safe. You've always been safe with me."

Beside him, Alana kneels, taking his hand. Her other hand brushes the side of Will's face; the heel of her palm meets Hannibal's, forming a shallow cup beneath Will's chin. And he's chilled to the marrow, his bones as fragile as glass, trembling with surprising violence but here, naked and vulnerable and caught between them both, he feels a disturbing happiness forming in the pit of his gut. Like this is how it's supposed to be. Like this is how it ought to have been all along.

His eyes slip shut.

He's not sure whose lips close over his own, but it's the most beautiful thing he's ever felt in his life.

*

"...You still with us, Will?"

"Mhm." He nods, blinking slowly to clear his vision. The dream is still vivid in his mind; he can still taste the ice forming on his tongue. So rarely has he imagined himself as the victim. But it's not like before. Not like the encephalitis. This dream exists firmly behind glass.

He can still feel the ghost of a warm mouth against his.

Zeller continues talking. "...liver damage consistent with a high dose of methadone, which was confirmed by the tox screen. That would appear to be the cause of death. We couldn't isolate any neurodegenerative disease process, or cancer, or anything of that nature."

"But what we did find," puts in Price, "were vascular changes in the hearts of all five cadavers suggesting they were all heavy users of methamphetamine. Zeller's pet corpse yielded trace amounts of the substance, suggesting a relatively short length of time between death and the last dose."

"We've ID'd four out of five," Jack says. His arms are folded, brow furrowed. "Jason Palmer, 29. Marcus Hargadon, 33. Antonio Martin, 24, and Harvey Wong, 36. Three of the men had been sleeping rough in the weeks leading up to their deaths. Palmer and Martin have served prison sentences, for armed robbery and burglary respectively. And all four had been in and out of various rehabilitation programmes, with no real success."

Will blinks. "Is there one nearby?"

"Is there what nearby?"

"A rehab program. Centre. Free clinic. Anything these men might have had in common besides their poison of choice."

"You think that's where the killer is finding them?"

"This is her last resort." He picks compulsively at the cuff of his shirt. There's something here, something just out of reach. The spark from which the fire of her madness was first born. He'll find it, if he digs deep enough, but the chill of the freezer still prickles at his skin. "They've returned again and again, and this time will always be the last time. And it never is. They come back over and over, strung out and half dead, and she can't stand it. She looks into their eyes and sees those last pieces of who they are, not dead but dying. That's what she's trying to save. She can't cure their illness, though she's tried. All she can do is preserve those last little pieces. Keep them locked away so they can never be destroyed."

Zeller and Price exchange glances, mildly bemused. "Are you suggesting she kills them to stop them from killing themselves?" Zeller asks. He's wary of Will. Even after his exoneration, the great and terrible mythology of his murders torn down and made null, there exists a tiny uncertainty; the part of Zeller which believes, against everything, that there is no smoke without fire. And Will would be bitter but Zeller's apology was sincere, and this too will heal in time. When Will finally finds the proof he's hunting for, and all doubts are erased for good.

"Not killing themselves," Will says. "Ruining themselves. Crossing the point of no return. She's seen it before, the way addiction consumes. The way it *destroys*, not just the addict but everyone around them. Like a black hole. This way, they'll be remembered for who they *were*, not who they would inevitably have become." He swallows, mouth dry. "An act of love. A letter of apology to the one she failed."

"This is the killer's way of making amends," Jack says, carefully, brow furrowed in that deep, unyielding manner he adopts whenever he attempts to follow Will down the dark tunnel of his own logic.

"Yes." He nods, emphatic. "Like closing a book just before you get to the paragraph that frightens you. Then tearing the rest of the pages out and burying them somewhere nobody will ever find them. You know how the book ends. You know what would happen, were you to read on. But this way, Red Riding Hood never goes into the woods. She never meets the wolf, and she never gets eaten. She's frozen in time, and nothing bad can ever happen to her."

"I'm not following this at all," Zeller mutters to Price.

"Just check them for links to the same damn centre," Jack says, a little irritably. "And keep working on ID'ing the last corpse." He's clearly been done with this conversation for the last five minutes, but he's dragged Will in on this yet again, and he knows better than to ignore his consultation.

"And to the lab," Will adds. Three pairs of curious eyes rise to meet his; he averts his gaze, feels their sudden attention burning through the thin skin of his eyelids. "Whoever did this must have known about the freezers. She knew they were never checked. There were no signs of forced entry - she's probably got a spare key. Your killer almost certainly worked there at some point. There'll be a crossover somewhere, it's just a matter of finding it."

"We could be looking at a current clinic employee," Price suggests. "They're getting the methadone from somewhere. A rehabilitation centre would be the natural choice."

"Good point. Start there." Jack turns, momentarily focusing his concentration on Will. He is intentionally difficult to read; he's known Will long enough to recognise the need to code his emotions, conceal his expression, render himself ambiguous. Sometimes, it even works. "You've done good work here, Will," he says, and that much appears to be the truth. It hasn't occurred to Jack that Will might be wrong. It's as if he's taken the whole Hannibal-is-the-Chesapeake-Ripper debacle and filed it away in some dark, cobwebbed corner of his memory palace, a box he will deliberately choose not to look in. "If I need anything else, I'll call."

Will blinks. "Am I being dismissed?"

"Unless you've got a real yearning to Google search all the free clinics and rehab programmes within a ten mile radius, there's not a whole lot of point to you being here right now." His coding is failing miserably; his casual veneer is flimsy. Will can see in the too-stern set of Jack's brow that something is amiss, and he thinks he knows exactly what that might be. He recalls Alana passing the mortuary, the stern click of her heels on the tiles. Casts his mind further back and recalls, in far greater detail, the white-hot anger burning in the dark, placid mirror of her eyes; the exquisite tension of every small muscle as she sat opposite him - hands cuffed, wrists raw - and *knowing*, as though her skull were open and her thoughts projected like an old movie, that if she could punch Jack Crawford in the teeth and get away with it, she would.

She has always been his champion. Even now, it seems, though the bond between them is stretched tight as cadaverous skin. How far does he have to go before she'll stop dead and refuse to follow? What strange light still draws her to him, and what could possibly snuff it out?

Another memory: the fierce heat of her mouth, the smooth, pale curve of her hips in the moonlight, the soft press of her breasts against his back. He banishes the thought immediately, silently mortified; she's more than that, she *deserves* more than that.

"Okay," he says, and if Jack knows what he's thinking, he doesn't say a word.

*

She sees him heading away from the forensics lab, looking typically pensive and perhaps a little flustered; the slant of his mouth suggests he's chewing the inside of his cheek, a nervous habit he occasionally exhibits. She's tried to avoid covertly psychoanalysing him, knowing he'd hate it, knowing he'd see it as a betrayal, but sometimes her mind connects the dots, subconsciously, and she can't ignore the evidence. This particular nervous tic surfaces when something has made him uncomfortable. A thought, a feeling, a suggestion. Something he can't shake off.

She doesn't ask herself what that might be.

He's so absorbed in whatever internal monologue he's processing that he almost careens straight into her. He shrinks back instinctively (avoiding the inevitable physical contact, she

thinks, and quickly shuts her inner psychiatrist down.) He blinks slowly, as though waking from a strange and prolonged dream, and she smiles, small and hesitant.

"Hi," she says.

"Alana," he says, somewhat surprised, like this is an unusual place to find her. He doesn't relax; he holds himself like a tightly-coiled spring, keeping a safe distance between them. There's a pang somewhere deep inside her. She knows she has no right to be hurt by this (she is, after all, the one who ran out on him without so much as an explanation) but there it is all the same: a space adjacent to her heart like a fresh bruise. The way he's looking at her - like he'd rather she be anyone else, *anyone* else - he must know she's been speaking with Jack, interfering in his affairs; even after the coldness of their last parting, she's still here.

"You look well," she says, because she can't think of anything else, and because he *does* look well, perturbed expression excepted. He looks better than he has for quite a while. It's the case. Will thrives on purpose, and even with all of her misgivings, she knows how much this matters to Will. Saving lives. Catching bad people. Using his uniquely unnerving talents for 'the greater good'. It's not altruism so much as a desperate need to be useful. Will doesn't know how to matter unless he matters to somebody else.

"I uh." He looks past her, around her, seeking something to focus on. Strange; she's usually the one person he will always look in the eye. "I guess I am," he says, gaze settling at last on her face, though his pupils flicker back and forth, erratic as pinballs. "There's a lot to be said for fresh air and daylight. Food's better out here too."

"I can imagine," she says. "How's the case going?"

"It's not," he says. "For me, I mean. It's going on without me. I'm just no longer a *part* of it."

"Does that bother you?"

He furrows his brow. "Who's asking? Alana the psychiatrist, or Alana my friend?"

Is she his friend still? She wants to be, in spite of everything, but that depends on which version of him he's going to be. Will the sweet, somewhat damaged FBI profiler, or Will the avenging angel. "I'm not trying to get inside your head," she says, cocking a hip in frustration. "I'm asking you a legitimate question. I know that you know about me speaking with Jack, and I *know* you understand why I did it."

"You're trying to protect me," he says, almost bitter. "Like you always do."

"Yes," she says, unapologetic.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'?"

He laughs without humour, a dry sound like sand over old bones. "Why would you protect me? *This* me? You don't like what you think I've become. You've made that perfectly clear. You're trying to turn back the clock, Alana, make me who I was before, but...the things I

know...the things that were done to me, they can't be undone. I can't be unmade because I *am*. This is me." He gestures at himself, a flick of the fingers, and there's a faint sense of disgust in there, like he's not entirely sure how he feels about who he is either. "This is me," he says again, quieter now; he's not angry with her, and that's what rips apart her faint veneer of indignation, revealing the pain beneath, the still-fresh wound. He should be angry but he cares too much. "This is who I've been all along. It just took him to make me see it."

"I won't let you destroy yourself," she says. The thickness of her voice takes her by surprise. She's on the verge of tears, and she never even realised it. She wraps her arms around herself, suddenly conscious of how cold it is here, how naked she feels under his gaze. "I won't let you lose who you are." Her eyes meet his, and she doesn't have to say the last part, because she knows he can see it: *you're too precious to me.*

"You say it as if it's a matter of choice," Will says, with curious resignation, like the outcome was decided a long time ago. Then he straightens up, unconsciously widening the distance between them again. "I have to go," he says, almost apologetically. "I have an appointment."

"With Hannibal?"

“For my sins,” he says.

*

The pre-therapy ritual, then, not half as elaborate as one might presume. A pressed shirt and a comb through the hair and he is instantly twice as presentable, an illusion which pleases his therapist even as he sees right through it. A tidy appearance might not truly betray a tidy mind, but never mind that: Will is making an *effort*.

Therapy itself is a ritual. It seems to Will that this is the dance between hunter and prey, a slow and constant chase through an increasingly dark and tangled thicket. But things have changed. Where once Will might have been the injured hare stumbling blind through the undergrowth, spilt blood pungent in Hannibal's nostrils, he now occupies a space in the shadows where even the canny, sharp-dressed predator cannot find him. And when Hannibal gazes upon the crisp crease of Will's shirt, the sudden steel in his spine, he imagines he can almost see the good doctor licking his lips, savouring the taste of his defiance.

So here they are. Two men in a room, each caught in the mad and irresistible gravity of the other. Their eyes lock every once in a while, seeking a gap in the armour of their nemesis; a hole through which the real self can be seen.

In amongst the thinly-coded small talk, the word games they engage in for the petty thrill of it, the true thread of today's conversation is revealed, slowly, a verbal striptease unwrapped with almost masochistic langour.

"I understand your return to the field has been truncated," Hannibal says. He is poised so perfectly in his seat that one might think his limbs are suspended perfectly in midair, his control absolute. This Hannibal is a marionette, Will thinks, watching the slow dance of Hannibal's fingers as he speaks; the way his fingertips flutter as though playing an arpeggio. He is a marionette, and his obscene, smiling face is carved from wood, his eyes flat and

painted. Above him, handling his strings with exquisite care, is a dark and frightening thing, a shadowed beast with ink-black antlers and eyes like burnt-out embers. That is the truth of Hannibal Lecter.

"I was asked to provide consultation. I provided it." Of course Will wants to see the case through til the end. He wants to be there should Jack miss a curveball, or fail to grasp the intricacies of Will's vision. *Her* design. Will knows this is a test, Jack's way of proving - to Alana, to the FBI, to Jack himself - that he can still do this. That the good Will can do far outweighs the psychological damage.

"I'm told you suspect the killer to be a woman." A perfectly blank statement, inviting Will to show his working. To demonstrate the pure empathy Hannibal finds so fascinating. Will does not bite.

"It's Jack's case," Will replies. "You ought to discuss it with him."

The minute quirk of an eyebrow. "I have," Hannibal replies. "He has requested that I consult in your absence. Your thought process intrigues me. You ascribe such unusual motivations, yet I cannot bring myself to contradict your ideas. We have grown accustomed to wrath and pride, envy and lust. Our book of sins is well-thumbed. But pity is a lesser-known sin."

"She's not motivated by pity," Will says, irritable, because Hannibal knows this already. "This is an expression of love."

"Can murder be said to be an act of love?"

"In this context, yes. She believes so. The ritualistic positioning of the bodies, the post-death immersion mimicking amniotic fluid - it suggests rebirth. She's severing the umbilicus that connects them to their old life, their old addiction. Her preservation might be seen as her preparing them for a becoming."

Hannibal tilts his head. "I've heard it said that the purest form of love is forgiveness," he says, thoughtful. "This...becoming, this *rebirth*, is indicative of something different. She sees a defect in them. A necrosis of the personality. Her love is conditional; she extends it on the proviso that they submit to her perception of good behaviour. They were already undergoing a transformation. She denies them their own becoming in deference to hers." He blinks, languid. His poise does not falter. "Is this what you consider love, Will?"

Stubbornness tugs at him somewhere deep inside. He hates this, the way Hannibal tricks these small revelations from him; psychoanalysis-by-proxy, because in the absence of Will Graham as serial murderer it is the only way Hannibal might come to know that part of him. To *nurture* that part of him. "It's what she considers love. Stasis, in the absence of a cure."

"Jack tells me that you suspect these men are surrogates of a kind, that this is an act of mercy. Sparing them a horrific fate. Tell me, Will, when you stepped into the mind of this angel of mercy, did your heart swell with love? Did you smile as you beheld them there, awaiting their glorious rebirth? What did you see?"

I saw you, Will thinks, and the shift in Hannibal's expression is subtle but he sees it all the same; that upward slope of the lips, pale eyes stark as sea ice. He has seen something inside Will, some small revelation which pleases him. *I saw you and you didn't want to save me.*

"I'm done consulting," Will says, a little terse. "I wonder what you'll see, when you look inside?"

This time Hannibal doesn't even try to conceal his smile. He rises slowly to his feet; the minute clicks and pops of his joints indicate a position held for far too long. The idea that Hannibal might feel such mundane things as pain and discomfort seems almost absurd to Will. "Doctor Bloom is concerned for your wellbeing," he says.

"Because I'm your patient, or because I'm back in the field?"

"She understands that these sessions are beneficial to you."

"But not to you."

His teeth are small, perfect. Wolfish. "She had her misgivings," he says, moving in a slow arc towards Will. "Doctor Bloom cares very much about you, Will. Truly, she acts in your best interests in all times. But even the best of us can be steered astray by our emotions."

"Yes," Will says. His throat feels too tight, his jaw stiff. His mind conjures, as it has so many times before, that same gleefully masochistic fantasy: Alana, naked in the cradle of Hannibal's arms, his lips grazing the pale curve of her neck; those lupine teeth just adjacent to the blue ribbon of a vein just beneath the skin. Her lips part. A soft sigh escapes, barely a whisper. An ink-black hand slides down, drinking in the topography of her skin; she turns, looks him in the eye, this monstrous wendigo, and she smiles.

Will blinks. The vision clears. "Even Alana," he says, deliberate, and he has known all along, but what scares him more than anything is the fondness about Hannibal's lips when he hears her name.

He feels Hannibal’s hand on his shoulder, unseen, a warm sensation, and not unpleasant. He looks up.

"Yes," Hannibal agrees, his smile gentle; the fox in the henhouse leading all the little birds to slaughter. “Even her.”

*

This time, when she goes to Will he's wary, the memory of her abandonment still fresh. And when she folds him wordlessly into her arms, rests his head in the cradle of her clavicle and presses her lips to the curve of his skull as though in absolution, she feels a tension in his muscles. Like he's waiting for the change of heart. Does he know, she wonders, that she went to Hannibal that night? Of course he does, he knows everything, but if he resents her for it she can't sense that. It's not betrayal he feels, but fear; his concern for her is as real as it can be, given that it's based upon a

(lie)

delusion. They stay like that a while, each curved to fit the other, the easy intimacy of bodies pressed together. His mouth is warm against her skin, his palms held just above the small of her back, but he makes no move to kiss her, to touch her, even to speak; everything that happens from here on is in her hands. The same hands which rake gently through the tangled mess of his hair, trail lightly across the back of his neck and up, cupping his jaw in her palms.

"This is not all that you are," she tells him. *This is not all I'm going to let you be*, she doesn't say, *let me tear you apart and stitch the pieces back together*. And he opens his mouth to protest but she silences him, her lips insistent against his: *be quiet, now's the time for you to listen.* They're both breathless by the time she pulls away, hands still clasping his face, skimming the planes of his cheekbones. "I know you, Will Graham," she says, barely a whisper. "And I know you're angry, and afraid, and I know you did what you did *because* you were angry and afraid, and...I know you believe, *really truly believe* that Hannibal is dangerous, but you can't let that change who you are." He still smells like pine needles and cold air, like he belongs outside, deep in the woods. His skin is cold beneath her fingers. "I *know* who you are," she says, and he's watching her silently, eyes heavy-lidded but attentive, focusing on the slow movement of her mouth. "I know who you are, even if you've forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten," he murmurs against her mouth. "I did, once. But I remember now."

*

She's peaceful beside him, her profile backlit in bluish moonlight, and it's been so long since he felt the warmth of another human being here, in this bed; it has been a monument to his solitude, a place he seldom sleeps for the nightmares he inevitably succumbs to. But here, with Alana, everything feels different. He's always taken strange comfort from the utter blackness of the night sky. It makes him feel safe, that sense of indifference, that great cosmic shrug, as though the universe couldn't give a shit about his struggles, his fears and thoughts and feelings.

("What do you want from me?" he'd asked, whispering against her parted lips.

She'd thought it for a moment, and he'd let her, tracing the point of her chin with his thumb with idle curiosity. Waiting patiently as she cycled through all the decisions she might make, all the consequences they might have. And after a time, she'd looked up at him, eyes grave and beautiful, and she'd said "I just want you to sleep beside me. Just for tonight. Will you?"

They held each other in the dark, content in their silence, and when at last her muscles had relaxed and her breathing had slowed to a gentle, steady rhythm, he'd untangled her from the cradle of his arms and lain there, quietly astonished at how easily she'd fallen asleep beside him, in spite of everything.)

The promise of sleep washes over Will like an erratic tide, bathing him in a state of warm, pleasantly muzzy contentment; strange, how safe he feels with her here, though he knows she's utterly fooled by the illusion that is Hannibal Lecter. But she has chosen to be here, with him, neither as a friend nor as a lover - what they are to one another is yet to be properly

explored and considered. She has chosen to sleep next to him, leaving herself vulnerable and defenceless, and it's with no small amount of awe that he glances occasionally over, drinking in the marble-white pallor of her skin. And when she goes back to Hannibal - because she will, and some faraway part of him can understand that - he'll smell woodsmoke in her hair, and Will on her skin, and he'll know. Will he feel betrayed? And if so, by whom?

He's lulled by the sound of her breathing, and in the grey, quiet space between wakefulness and sleep, it reminds him of the low hum of an industrial freezer.

*

He dreams of the water again, of Alana smiling down at him and the cold so intense the air seems to freeze in his lungs. He dreams of the world through a veil of liquid blue. He can still feel the gentle pressure of her arms around him, her cheek warm against his spine, and that's enough, he thinks, that's all he'll ever need. The ghost of her beside him as the water fills his mouth. The way she regards his curled-up form with something a little like love as she holds him down, hands clasped gently around his throat. *I know who you are,* she whispers, barely audible above the hiss of rising water. *This way, you'll never forget.*

Above him, a shadow slips into focus. The dark man, long and thin, antlers like the branches of a burnt-out tree. He shuts his eyes, focusing on the ebb of the water, the way it laps at his skin. And then *his* voice, vivid as a dream: *Is this what you consider love, Will?*

The voice feels warm in his ears. His mouth curls into a smile. Everything feels complete, then. Everything feels right.

*

He wakes with a start. Slowly, he takes stock of himself, glancing over at the blurry blue digits of his bedside clock: *It's 3.18am. I'm in my house. My name is Will Graham.* Funny, how naturally this ritual still comes, after all this time.

Alana is still asleep. He thinks about reaching out to her, drawing her to him in search of some kind of warmth, but he can still feel the ghost of his dream about his skin – the pressure of water against him, that terrible coldness and the shadow cast across him, eclipsing him – and he can't bring himself to touch her. Slowly, he gets up, easing the stiffness from his muscles and pads downstairs. The dogs, alerted by the whine of the floorboards, gather round him in a semi-protective huddle, the click of their claws against wood forming a dissonant chorus. They escort him from the stairs to the living room where he climbs onto the sofa, burying his face in cushions that smell like dog fur and dust. There's a worn-out old afghan folded on the arm of the sofa and he takes that too, cocooning himself inside, trying to keep the bite of the cold night air from his skin.

He dreams of Hannibal a lot these days. It scared him, to begin with; it felt as though Hannibal had insinuated himself inside Will's head through one of the many, many cracks. An opportunistic invader against the backdrop of his illness, taking sly root inside his brain and flourishing there, painting his name all over the landscape of Will's mind. It hadn't occurred to Will until later – until he and Hannibal had come face to face that first time after Brown's attack and Will had looked into Hannibal's eyes and seen only himself – that he'd

invited Hannibal in. Because the truth – unpalatable and frightening but truth all the same – is that Hannibal belongs there. The same part of Will that wants so desperately to close his hands around the delicate column of Hannibal's throat also wants Hannibal never, ever to leave.

Is this what you consider love, Will?

Will pulls the thin afghan tighter around himself and wonders what Hannibal considers love.

"Did I snore?"

He cracks open an eye. Alana is a pale ghost wrapped in bedsheets, her hair rumpled, mouth curled in a lopsided, slightly embarrassed smile.

"I had a dream," he says. "I couldn't get back to sleep. Didn't want to wake you, so I came down here."

She perches on the arm of the sofa, drawing the blankets up around her breasts, an almost self-conscious gesture even though she's wearing one of Will's t-shirts. "Kind of hard to stay asleep when your dogs are tip-tapping all over the place," she says, tilting her head a little. "Sounds like you've got a whole bunch of Fred Astaires down here."

"Their rhythm is a little off," Will says.

"What did you dream about?"

He draws in a slow breath. Alana will know if he lies. She'll know if he evades. He feels like he owes her the truth, though he's not sure why – she was the one who came here uninvited. She was the one who doubted him. She's the one who will go back to Hannibal – maybe not tomorrow, maybe not the day after, but eventually. He's not under any illusions: she's here with him because he is a question she doesn't know how to answer, and she always was a sucker for empiricism.

"The case," he says, shuffling so that he's propped up against the opposite arm, arms wrapped around his knees. He must look ridiculous, like a woolly caterpillar, but she has the decency not to laugh. "I was inside the freezer, and the water was rising around me."

"Must've been cold," she says.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I still am." And he is; he can feel the chill of the water pressing against him, stealing the breath from his lungs. Gooseflesh prickles his forearms. He pulls his knees tighter against his chest, willing himself to warm up, but it's as though all the blood has been drained from his body, and all there is left is air swirling through emptied veins.

She approaches him slowly, the way one might approach an unfamiliar animal. He is carefully passive, neither inviting nor rejecting: let her decide, he thinks, as she curls up beside him on the sofa. Let her figure out how likely he is to bite. He never will. That's what he needs her to know, what he'll never tell her out loud because she won't believe it if he does. She drapes the blanket across them both, stretches her limbs and envelops his cold body

with her own. After a moment – when he's sure she's comfortable here, with him – he shifts, better accommodating her, and the interlock of their limbs feels like the most natural thing in the world.

"Sometimes it feels like you're afraid of me." Her voice reverberates in the hollow cavity of his chest, a rumble that seems to travel all the way down to his spine. "Angry with me, maybe. I can't tell."

"Maybe you're projecting," he says.

He feels her limbs momentarily stiffen, an automatic reaction; she feels stung, he's certain, but she relaxes again, tugging the blanket up and around her so only her face is visible. "I doubted you," she says, slowly, as though she's thinking very hard about what she's saying. "And sometimes I think that if I'd believed you in the beginning, things might be different now."

"Believed me about not killing those girls, or believed me about Hannibal?"

"You know the answer to that," she says.

He nods, conceding.

"You're not a murderer," she says, decisive. "I know that."

"Do you think I ever could be, under the right circumstances?"

She lifts her head. Looks him in the eye. Her mouth is hard, her jaw set. "I think anyone can be anything, under the right circumstances," she says. "I don't know what the right circumstances for murder would be. I hope I never know."

There's a smart reply on the tip of his tongue – *ask Hannibal, I'm sure he'd know* – but he bites it back. Swallows it down. There's no sense in antagonising her. She doesn't believe him, and it's galling as hell but he understands. Alana knows Hannibal, *thinks* she knows him. Thinks she loves him, maybe, Will doesn't know. But all she knows is the marionette. The mask. The man behind them is a mystery, and to glimpse him is a gift or a punishment, depending on his intentions when he does unmask. For Will, it's intended as a gift, and sometimes it feels that way; sometimes, seeing the real him – stark and terrifying and beautiful as a skull seen through the skin – leaves Will elated, exhilarated, like seeing the full ferocity of the Aurora on a black night.

Sometimes though. Sometimes, it feels as though he's being punished. And sometimes he thinks he deserves that.

"You admire him," Alana says, and the perfect synchronicity of it almost sends a shiver down his spine. "You say his name with such hatred that I don't ever really believe that's what you feel. It's what you think you should feel. What you *want* to feel. But that isn't really it. You admire him and that scares you. Because if you truly believe he's capable of the things you say he's done, what does that say about you? What kind of person does it make you, to be in awe of a human being like that?"

He licks his dry lips, swallows hard. “If you’re going to psychoanalyse me,” he says, voice low and even, “I’d ask you to do it elsewhere. Preferably a long way away from me.”

“I’m not…” She exhales, slow. “I’m sorry if it seems that way. I’m concerned about you. About all of this. I’ve been worried for a while now.”

“I know,” he says. “You shouldn’t be.”

“Hannibal would agree with you,” Alana says.

He smiles a little at that, imperceptible in the dark, though he’s sure she can feel it. “Doctor Lecter would know,” he says, without a trace of irony. “He knows my mind better than anyone else.”

*

“You were right.”

Three words that, were Will a different kind of person, in a different kind of job, he might feel a certain satisfaction upon hearing. Jack flips through the report – scribbled notes, mostly, not yet pruned and tidied and collated – eyeing Will with one eyebrow cocked a little higher than the other. Sometimes, Will thinks Jack must suspect psychopathy, or perhaps witchcraft.

“Tell me,” Will says.

Jack clears his throat. Technically, Will doesn’t need to know this. The outcome of the case is supposed to be irrelevant. But when Jack called him at six in the morning – Alana still asleep on the sofa, though Will had already been awake for several hours, sleep strangely elusive – he was glad to hear that familiar, authoritative bark: “Get down here, Will, I’ve got something to show you.”

“Helena Scott, aged thirty-six. We found her in a rehab centre approximately twelve miles from the laboratory. According to her employment history, she’d previously worked as a lab tech in several facilities – including for Meyer Medical, a little over four years ago. You know the crazy thing? She didn’t even wait for us to tell her why we’d taken her in. She told us everything. Perfectly calm, perfectly lucid. Her twin brother overdosed on methamphetamine four years ago. His was the corpse we had trouble identifying. The only one she didn’t kill. Before he died, he damaged their family irreparably. Stole repeatedly from their parents, almost burned the house down one night when he was too high to notice. She’s completely unrepentant.” Jack shakes his head. “So there you have it. Murder to make amends.”

“You were wrong about one thing.”

Will turns. Hannibal stands in the doorway, casefile in hand, smiling that cool, passionless smile. Of course, Will thinks. Of course he’d be here. Officially, he’s consulting. His assessments will go down on record as leading to the apprehending and arrest of Scott. That

doesn't bother Will. What bothers him is the way Hannibal's gaze – placid as a mountain lake – seems to bore through him, burrowing beneath the skin like something virulent.

"What was that?" Jack looks mildly pained at Hannibal's interruption, but knows better than to publicly chastise him for it.

"You suggested our killer was trying to make amends," Hannibal says. "It would seem otherwise. She asserts that her killing and preserving these young men was to prevent them from damaging their loved ones, the way her brother had damaged her own family. To assuage the hurt they would surely suffer by providing a different pain. A finite pain, one from which they might eventually recover." He pauses. "It was not an act of love, Will."

Behind those calm eyes, that perfectly poised expression lies a glimmer of satisfaction. It's nothing so petty as proving Will wrong – empathy and psychoanalysis are wildly different approaches to profiling, and in any case superiority has never been a point of contention between them. Will is not stupid. He knows the parallels Hannibal is drawing, the deliberate direction of Will's attentions to the error of his perception: *what you deigned to call 'love' is merely the murder of one's memory – erasing the person that was and putting in their place a poor, blameless angel.*

He's hardly surprised to find Hannibal in his de-facto office a little later, standing before what is nominally Will's desk. Hannibal hears Will's approach, turns to him with a smile of such perfect benevolence that the fine hairs on the back of Will's neck rise instinctively.

"I must congratulate you on your triumphant return to the field," he says.

"I think you're being overly generous," Will replies.

"Jack trusts your counsel enough to reinstate you against tremendous opposition," Hannibal says. He's rearranging the stationary on Will's desk, an entirely unconscious gesture. "Many spoke against you, Will. It was suggested that you might be too fragile still, too volatile. They were surprised when I vouched for you." He pauses, his message implicit: *I'm on your side. I always will be.* "They underestimate you, Will. They don't comprehend your potential."

"Well, how could they?" Will says, a little sourly. "They don't have your…unique insight." He lets that stand, unelaborated upon, and Hannibal's small half-smile indicates his comprehension: *they didn't screw with my brain.*

"I suppose you're right," Hannibal says.

Will slips past him, scooping his tidied belongings from the desk and into his pockets. He tries to ignore Hannibal's closeness, the burn of his gaze as Will manouevres around him, surprisingly graceful despite his discomfort. Hannibal is too close. He's too close and it feels as though he'll reach out at any moment, place those wide, gentle hands on Will's shoulders, and Will doesn't know if he'll yell or swing for him or both.

"Chanel," Hannibal says, speaking low against Will's ear. "A somewhat feminine scent, if you don't mind me saying. Still, an improvement on your usual cologne."

His skin crawls. He's perfectly still, one hand in his pocket, the other splayed out on the desk. He can feel the heat of Hannibal's skin, the space between them so small as to be negligible. And even as his skin crawls some small, defiant part of himself is daring Hannibal to come closer.

"It's quite all right," Hannibal says. His voice is almost a murmur. "I'm not so presumptuous as to assume that Dr. Bloom belongs to me. We're all adults here, are we not?"

"I'm not…"

"I understand," Hannibal says. His hand is feather-light against Will's spine, almost imperceptible but *there*, unmistakably, and though Will's eyes are firmly trained on the distance he knows instinctively that whatever space existed between them has closed now. The sleek and perfect fit of Hannibal's chest against his back, the way their shoulders align as though designed this way. "This is good for you, I think. She is good for you. We both are. You seek balance. She is your better angel, and I…"

And you seek to destroy me, Will does not say.

"You know what you are," Will replies, voice a bitter whisper. He wants to run, to break free of his strange, awful embrace but he can't, he won't; he's immobile, rooted firmly on this spot, and he's aware of some part of himself – some part buried deep – that wants this perhaps more than he's wanted anything. To give himself over entirely, to relent and never look back. How easy it would be! How beautiful, how simple, to realise this part of himself, to *become*, at long last. And perhaps Hannibal was somewhat correct. Perhaps Alana does not love him – the *idea* of him, maybe, but not *him*, not who he really is - and perhaps Will's a fool to pretend she ever might.

He doesn't know what this is, but if Hannibal thinks it love, then he's as much a fool as Will.

"I know what I am," Hannibal agrees. His nose brushes Will's neck, his body perfectly still, perfectly arched, balletic and graceful. "And so do you. I am the one who sees you, Will. *Truly* sees you. I am not your better angel. I see you as you are. I see you as you could be. As you *deserve* to be seen."

Will thinks of the freezer, of Alana and Hannibal above him, smiling identical, angelic smiles. He thinks of the chill of the water, the breathless ache of his lungs. He thinks of the darkness, and the warmth of lips pressed against his. Between the two of them, there is balance. Between their wild idealisations – *who you were, who you deserve to be, who you could be* – there is the truth of him.

You seek balance.

He thinks of Hannibal, pulling him from the freezer. He thinks of Alana, face distorted in the water.

He thinks of Alana asleep beside him, utterly vulnerable. And Hannibal behind him, his predator's smile and clever hands, the heat of his mouth against the curve of Will's ear. He wonders what it would be like to be caught between them, like that, each in the proximity of

the other and eminently comfortable that way, a perfect triumvirate. Both of them certain they know him better, both of them wrong. Because Will knows who he is now. Will remembers.

This is not love. This never will be. But for now, it’s balance. For now, it’s okay.

End Notes

this fic was born of my constant & abiding need for good ot3s. And by 'good' I mean 'hugely unhealthy and dysfunctional and almost certain to end in tears'. I'm on tumblr if you feel the need to come shout at me for my woeful knowledge of fine wines. I'll understand.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!